

The Democrats also targeted wealthy businessman Benjamin F. Keith and a host of other Populists and Republicans, regardless of their race. He held fast to his principles throughout the 1898 campaign, refusing multiple attempts to threaten him into joining the Red Shirts. As the 1898 election drew near, Keith wrote his Populist compatriot Marion Butler to explain that “they have not killed or run me out of town yet although they hate me with all the hatred that corporation influence can aspire. I trust that things will turn out all ok.” After threats failed to intimidate Keith, he was “visited” by a mob that forced its way into his yard at night only to be met by Keith, his wife, and his eleven-year-old son, all well armed and ready to open fire. When physical intimidation failed, the Democrats and Red Shirts targeted his business, forcing it into ruin by intimidating customers and traveling agents alike. Keith was also slandered in the papers, and, as a result, he retaliated with a fist fight to defend his honor against James Fore, who was also his neighbor.<sup>6</sup>

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Archives, Office of Archives and History, Raleigh; Hayden, *WLI*, 58-9.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Keith was a prominent businessman and reluctant politician in the city and, like Waddell, Sprunt, and others, had a long family tradition of prominence in southeastern North Carolina. However, Keith sought to improve his city and state through third party politics and as a member of the Board of Aldermen appointed by Russell. Years after the campaign was over, Keith was respected for his fortitude but still held deep resentment for his treatment at the hands of Democrats. Even as late as 1921, Keith was still battling with Democrats over his patronage position as Collector of Customs in the city. In a letter to President Warren G. Harding, Keith recalled the 1898 campaign for the president, providing details of the threats and dangers he and his family withstood. Keith recounted that when the Democrats realized they “could not buy with offices or could not intimidate me to join their red shirt mob,” he was notified that, unless he joined, he “would be killed and put in the Cape Fear River unless I left the city at once.” Keith believed Fore

As the campaign progressed in both speechmaking and print outlets, the four leaders were expanded to six. “Remember the Six” handbills and posters were circulated around town, and the men knew they were marked for death. Two additional men were recognized as Chief of Police John Melton and white attorney Caleb B. Lockey. Governor Russell was also added to the invective as yet another leader of the city’s black voters. According to W. J. Harris of Wilmington, the men of the “Big Six” were to be shot because they worked “for the interest of the Republican Party.”<sup>7</sup>

One of the Big Six, Republican William Chadbourn, was postmaster and a member of a wealthy family that operated Chadbourn Lumber Company and employed white and black workers in seasonal jobs. In response to the Democrat’s white supremacy campaign issue of “negro domination” in newspapers, Chadbourn penned a letter to Republican senator Jeter Pritchard on September 26, 1898 to explain his view that

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had written an article that was published statewide discrediting Keith and, as a result, went to Fore’s business, where Keith claimed 40 to 50 Red Shirts were employed and pummeled Fore by himself. Fore was partner in the Fore and Foster Planing Mill with Flavel Foster, one of the men of the “Big Six.” As a result of the unbiased slander, Fore lost favor in the city and left for the remainder of the campaign. B.F. Keith to Marion Butler, November 2, 1898, Marion Butler Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Benjamin F. Keith to President Warren G. Harding, July 5, 1921, photocopy on file in Research Branch, Office of Archives and History, original in possession of Thomas J. Keith; Benjamin F. Keith, *Memories*, (Raleigh, N.C.: Bynum Printing Company, 1922), 79-111; Sprunt, *Chronicles of the Cape Fear River*, 595-597; Crow, *Maverick Republican*, 131; R.D.W. Connor, William K. Boyd, J.G. deRoulhac Hamilton, *History of North Carolina: North Carolina Biographies*, V (Chicago: The Lewis Printing Company, 1919), 117-121; *Contested Election Case*, 361; Keith, *Memories*, 107-8; Hill’s 1897 Wilmington City Directory.

<sup>7</sup> *Contested Election Case*, 390.